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The Sense Organs of Hearing and Smelling

(Lecture by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra on November 16, 1986)

I will continue talking about the senses and sense organs as they are discussed in the sutra. Today we will cover hearing and smelling, and show that fundamentally, as we saw with the sense of seeing, there is no substance to these senses. They do not exist in the way that we believe them to exist.

The Buddha tells us that hearing itself is the same as True Suchness. True Suchness is motionless. It makes no distinctions and contains no vexations. Once the mind moves, there is vexation. Vexation is really neither within nor without. It is nothing more than illusion. The sutra arrives at this conclusion through a careful analysis of the phenomenon of hearing.

Three elements must exist for hearing to occur: first, the contrast of stillness and motion; second, the sense organ of hearing (the ear); and third, the space through which sound is transmitted. When there is contact with the ear, hearing occurs, but this hearing has no real existence—it is fleeting and transitory. Hence we say that it is illusory.

We usually hear sound from outside, but sound may arise from within as well. Some people experience this as a ringing in the ears. Those of you who are older may have had this experience. It is simply a physiological response of the body, unconnected to the outside world.

When I was in Japan, I went to visit an old monk. After we talked for about half an hour, the old reverend said, "My ears told me not to speak anymore." I asked what he meant. He said, "My ears ring when I've said enough. I should be quiet now and rest." But I wondered why I heard nothing. I had not yet heard of ringing in the ears.

Someone just mentioned to me that long exposure to loud rock and roll can produce a similar effect. I am sure this can be true. Loud noises can damage the ear.

Sound does not simply have to be loud enough to cause damage. Sound can create an enduring effect on the emotions. There's a Chinese saying that after you have listened to a beautiful concert, you will continue to hear lovely music reverberating in the concert hall long after the musicians have left. Literally, "the sound circles the pillars for three days."

Your response to sound may be connected to your own attachment or preference to a particular voice or kind of sound. Sometimes you may simply be impressed or moved by the sound of someone's voice, rather than by the content of what he or she says. You may hear the voice linger for days. A

left-home disciple of mine has a very pleasant voice. Some people go to the temple just to hear the sound of his voice. When they look at him they think, "Gee, he doesn't look like much, but what a great voice he has!"

A deep impression of and preoccupation with the sound of someone's voice can be a source of vexation.

The ear can produce sensations and illusions in other ways. There is an exercise that Chinese Taoists do 36 times in the morning and 36 times at night. It's called "beating the heavenly drums." You put your thumbs over the flaps of your ears and tap the top of your head lightly with your fingers. If you knock too hard, you can become dizzy. It is done to clear the head and calm the mind. Because it is done with the ears closed, the tapping may seem to produce quite a loud noise. But if you try it without closing your ears, you will see that there is really not much sound produced. Another Taoist exercise is to place your little finger in your ear (not your thumb this time) and gently shake it. This can produce a feeling of well-being. These last examples demonstrate how a variety of stimuli to the ear can produce illusory perceptions or feelings.

When you sit in meditation, not in a deep state of samadhi, but nevertheless with few wandering thoughts, it is quite likely that you will hear sounds you do not ordinarily hear. Once again, these are illusory perceptions of the ear.

Most people realize that what they hear under circumstances like these is not real. But almost everyone believes that what they hear under normal circumstances is absolutely real.

Let's return to the Surangama Sutra and the basic issue of sound—is it real or not? Common-sense says that sound is real, but the sutra shows that sound has no real existence and is therefore illusory.

The first element of hearing is the contrast of motion and stillness. That is, the ear must be sufficiently still or calm to perceive sound. The ear will then be able to pick up movement in the air. If there were nothing but stillness, nothing would be heard. If there were nothing but movement, sound could not be distinguished. Thus there must be both stillness and motion for hearing to occur.

At lunch, Ming Yee sat beside me, but he complained that he was unable to hear what I said. He found this very frustrating and wondered if he was getting old before his time. Now, in the lecture, Paul, who is sitting at the other end of the hall from me, has no trouble hearing what I say. It is quiet now, and there are few distractions. At lunch, there was a crowd of voices each one interfering with the other. Ming Yee's ears were not still enough or perhaps sharp enough to overcome the interference. Right now he is not having any trouble hearing me.

The Surangama Sutra states that stillness and motion are basically contradictory states; they cannot co-exist. When there is stillness there cannot be motion. When there is motion there be no stillness. It does not really follow, then, that we can hear because of the co-existence of stillness and motion, since they are mutually contradictory. Some of you might object to this and say that that which is in a state of motion is in fact the sound, and it is the the ears that are in a state of stillness. But if the ears were really still, they would not be able to be affected by sound. The ears would remain still and no hearing would occur. Thus it must be that our ears move with the sound. And if sound is motion and our ears are in motion, then what our ears experience is a chaotic array of changing impressions—this is what we call hearing. What we hear most of the time when we think we are really hearing is illusory.

Only a flat, flawless mirror reflects clearly. Only the calm, smooth surface of water will show a clear image of what is above the surface. It follows that

the ear, when in motion, will imprecisely render what is to be heard. If you argue that hearing comes only from the sense organ of the ear, ponder the fact that a dead person may have the tissue of the ear intact, but a dead person cannot hear anything. You believe that hearing comes from space, because the sound that we hear is transmitted through space. But space is space because it's empty, because it's void. It cannot have any function. How can it store sound?

If we analyze the three elements necessary for hearing, motion and stillness, the ear, and space, in view of what was said above, we can conclude that sound or the phenomenon of hearing cannot be found in any one of these elements separately. Now, the question is, can we say that sound or hearing exists in the three when they are united together?

Common-sense tells us that stillness and motion, the ear, and space must be present for hearing to occur. The sutra does not deny this, but this is not the issue. The important question is: from whence does hearing arise? If we say it comes from the three elements, we will not be able to pinpoint it. We will not be able to find any place to which hearing belongs. We must then conclude that hearing does not exist as we believe it to exist. It is illusory. There really is no such thing as hearing.

The underlying principle here is that all dharmas arising from causes and conditions have no self-nature and are empty. They are without real existence.

The other day I was out walking with Guo Yuen Shih, and we saw a shop called Illusion Video. Guo Yuen Shih mused whether the owner of the store



was enlightened because he realized that all things are illusions. Whatever appears on the TV screen is a product of electronic signals stored on magnetic video tape. These are only images, appearances. There is no substance behind them. Even the stories on which films are based are made-up. What videos really show is one illusion piled upon another.

Do not get caught up in the sound of things. You should not take what you hear to be absolutely real whether it is sound or speech, good or bad, pleasing or distasteful. Do not be attached to these sounds. In this way you will avoid vexations.

Here is a sad story that illustrates the extent to which hearing can cause suffering. In Taiwan there's a drawing called the "Patriotic Lottery." Twenty years ago the first prize was equivalent to \$5,000. That was a lot of money in Taiwan at that time. There was a man who made it his habit to buy a ticket every time the lottery was run. He told his whole family what numbers he picked so that they could follow along when the winning numbers were chosen. On one particular night the son ran up to his father and told him he had won the lottery. The father said, "Really?" The son said, "I heard it over the radio." The father was ecstatic, "I won the lottery. I won the lottery." Suddenly he collapsed and fell into a coma. He had had a heart attack. He went to the hospital and died there. The next day the family checked the newspaper again and realized that the father had not won. He was one number off. The son had misheard the radio. A problem with hearing caused his father's death. Even very simple sounds can lead to tremendous vexations.

All of our senses can be misleading. Something may make us happy for the moment, but it is doubtful that the happiness will last. There is no lasting, permanent happiness. At least the man in this story died happy. He thought that he was a rich man. Maybe he realized his folly later.

In the same way that the elements of hearing were analyzed, the Surangama Sutra analyzes the elements of smelling. There must exist a contrast between penetration and obstruction, the sense organ of smelling (the nose), and space. Of these three elements, only the element of penetration and obstruction is different from that of hearing. Thus penetration and obstruction parallel motion and stillness. To understand the idea of penetration and obstruction imagine your nose had no end to it and was just a tube open at both ends. Air would just flow right through and there would be no way to smell anything. So there must be obstruction present. If, on the other hand, there were only obstruction, and your nose was a tube closed at both ends, no smelling would take place either. Of course penetration and obstruction cannot coexist simultaneously. Like hearing, then, smelling is an ever-changing array of elements that is at base without substance.

And as with hearing, it is our minds that really create what we smell. You may think that a beautiful aroma is pleasant or that a great stink is a horror to endure, but people do get used to smells. There is a Chinese saying that: "If you stay in a greenhouse long enough, the flowers lose their fragrance." By the same token, if you work in a fish market long enough, even the smell of abalone (known for it's evil smell) would cease to annoy you. It is the distinctions made in our minds that lead to vexation.

It is not our sense organs which are important, but our attitude, the posture of the mind towards what we encounter in our lives. Last Thursday a woman came to me and told me of the hardships she had been through. She told me how she came to this country and how she struggled to make a living working in restaurants under exceedingly harsh conditions. She was exploited by the people she worked for, and she lived like this for five years. She told me she had no idea how she had lived through the hard times. I said, "You simply got used to the difficulty and the time went by." The

woman said, "I'm not sure I could go through this again." "If you really had to, you would," I said. I told her that human beings are born into this world to suffer. People who suffer and don't realize they are suffering are foolish. The wise know they suffer, when they suffer. The woman thought that maybe the rich do not really suffer. They live the good life.

And I said, "That's not right, either." I know a wealthy lady whose son is grown and successful, but every time she talks to me all she does is complain about her problems." The woman then asked me, "If the rich have so many problems, why bother being rich?" I said, "Poverty doesn't ensure happiness, either. The amount of money you have doesn't determine how many problems you have. With Buddhadharma as your foundation, you can be happy if you're poor or happy if you're rich. There's nothing wrong with being rich and there's

nothing wrong with being poor. What is important is your approach to life."

Someone once said to me, "Shih-fu, you're really very lucky. You have no children. You have no family. You don't have to worry about a career. You're a left-home person, and so you have no vexations." I replied, "Children, family, career have nothing to do with it. I don't have children, but I have disciples whom I must help. I have no family, but I have temples to lead. I have no career, but I work hard spreading the Dharma, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, yet I have little vexation." Having no responsibility does not prevent vexation. On the other hand, taking responsibility does not automatically create vexation. It depends on your attitude and your approach to life. If you approach your responsibilities simply as things to do, and do not attach to hope of success or fear of failure, you will find that your vexations will be few.



Brooklyn College Sangha

I work in a high-pressure job, the Admissions and Financial Aid Office at Brooklyn College. The pressure is worst at registration. People wonder how I remain calm. My reply? I meditate. I guess that is why some students and colleagues asked me to instruct them and we formed a meditation group.

I thought that starting a meditation group would be easy. The first obstacle was finding the right day and time. The second was to find a suitable place that we could use on an ongoing basis. I went to Bob Oliva, a friend who is the director of Career Counseling at Brooklyn College, and asked him for help. He was very supportive. Some of his colleagues were interested in joining the meditation group and soon we decided on a convenient time and place. We chose Thursday at 1:00 p.m. We gave up our lunch hour to meditate. At our first meeting, only one student and about eight staff members showed up.

Much to my surprise, word got around, and some people, whom I would never have suspected of having an interest in meditation, asked me to teach them the basics. I am talking about middle-aged men and grandmothers who did not seem like the kind of Americans you might expect to be interested in Eastern disciplines. The truth is that they were most interested in relaxation. But that is all right.

Initially, a group of about twenty met in the basement of the Newman (Catholic) Center, thanks to Father D'Albro's generosity. Eventually, the group dwindled to a core of about eight to ten faithful practitioners who still meet on Thursdays at one o'clock. One student who met with us at the first meeting is now organizing a meditation club, and it should be chartered this fall.

When I first got the idea, I thought that a great number of students would participate, and that they would be the only ones interested. As things turned out, we now have a group of Brooklyn College staff members which meets once a week, which we call the Brooklyn College Sangha, and we have student meditation club. Such is the way of Ch'an.

I hope this encourages all of you to start meditation groups of your own.

Sincerely,

Guo Chang



Photograph by Shaw Wang

Center News

We are planning another Bargain Bazaar for October 8. There will be many items for sale: clothing, stationery, jewelry, small gift items and food. Come and join in the festivities.

Shih-fu will be back on November 1. He will begin a lecture tour at the universities of Indiana and Illinois from November 6 to 11. He will lecture at Rutgers University on November 14. Details of these lectures will be posted at the end of September. Please call the center for more information. Our phone number is (718) 592-6593.

Beginner's Meditation Classes

Classes are scheduled for Saturday **October 21** and **November 18**, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Please call to register.

Retreat

Our November 7-day retreat will be from 7:00 p.m. **November 24** to 8:00 a.m. **December 1**, The Christmas 7-day retreat will be from 7:00 p.m. **December 25** to 8:00 a.m. **January 1**. Please register early.

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